

# WITNESS FOR JUSTICE

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## Witness for Justice #549

October 10, 2011

### Wondering About Our Priorities

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Ivan Doig's novel *The Whistling Season*, is the story of the 1909-1910 school year among the families of Marias Coulee, Montana—a place that isn't even a town but instead the center of a pattern “of trails in the grass that radiated in as many directions as there were homesteads with children, all converging to that schoolyard spot.” The one-room school in Marias Coulee is synonymous with community.

Metaphorically Doig describes the pairing of the community with its teacher as a marriage, and when, on a Saturday morning, the teacher jilts the families of Marias Coulee by hopping on the train to elope, the bereft school board meets on Sunday to consider how to find an adult who will care for the community's children come Monday.

Fast forward a hundred years and from the fictional to the real world. Here is Congress proposing to cut the national deficit by reducing spending on public schools and other domestic essentials. Yet federal tax revenues as a share of the national economy are lower than at any time since 1950.

Texas saved money this school year by cutting pre-kindergarten for 100,000 children. In Ohio, where I live, the

governor and legislature cut taxes and then cut state education spending to the bone and warned school districts to use a new law that guts public sector collective bargaining as a tool to save money by lowering teachers' salaries and benefits. Cleveland has eliminated all school social workers. In New York City, 7,000 classes are above the contractual limit—for kindergartners, 25 students; for first through sixth grade, 32 students; for middle school, 33 students; and for high school, 34 students.

The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities reports that 23 states reduced support for public education this school year: Arizona, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Iowa, Illinois, Kansas, Louisiana, Michigan, Mississippi, Missouri, Nebraska, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, Texas, Utah, Washington, and Wisconsin. States that have complied with court orders over the years to equalize funding between wealthier and poorer school districts are now responding to the budget crisis by slashing equity remedies, punishing the school districts least able to compensate with their own resources for the loss of federal and state funds.

I wonder what kind of society reduces services for children and gives huge tax cuts to billionaires. What kind of society turns against its school teachers and rewards with tax loopholes the hedge fund managers who leveraged our economy into a recession? What kind of society cuts pensions for teachers even though these pensions are largely paid for by teachers' own contributions? What kind of society seems to value investment in perpetual and apparently unwinnable wars but doesn't seem to value the formation of its children? What kind of society spends so little time with children that a sizeable number of adults fail to appreciate how hard it is to manage a group of children and at the same time be fully attentive to each child's development and learning?

These are not merely questions about public policy; they are also questions about public morality. What kind of society have we become?

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